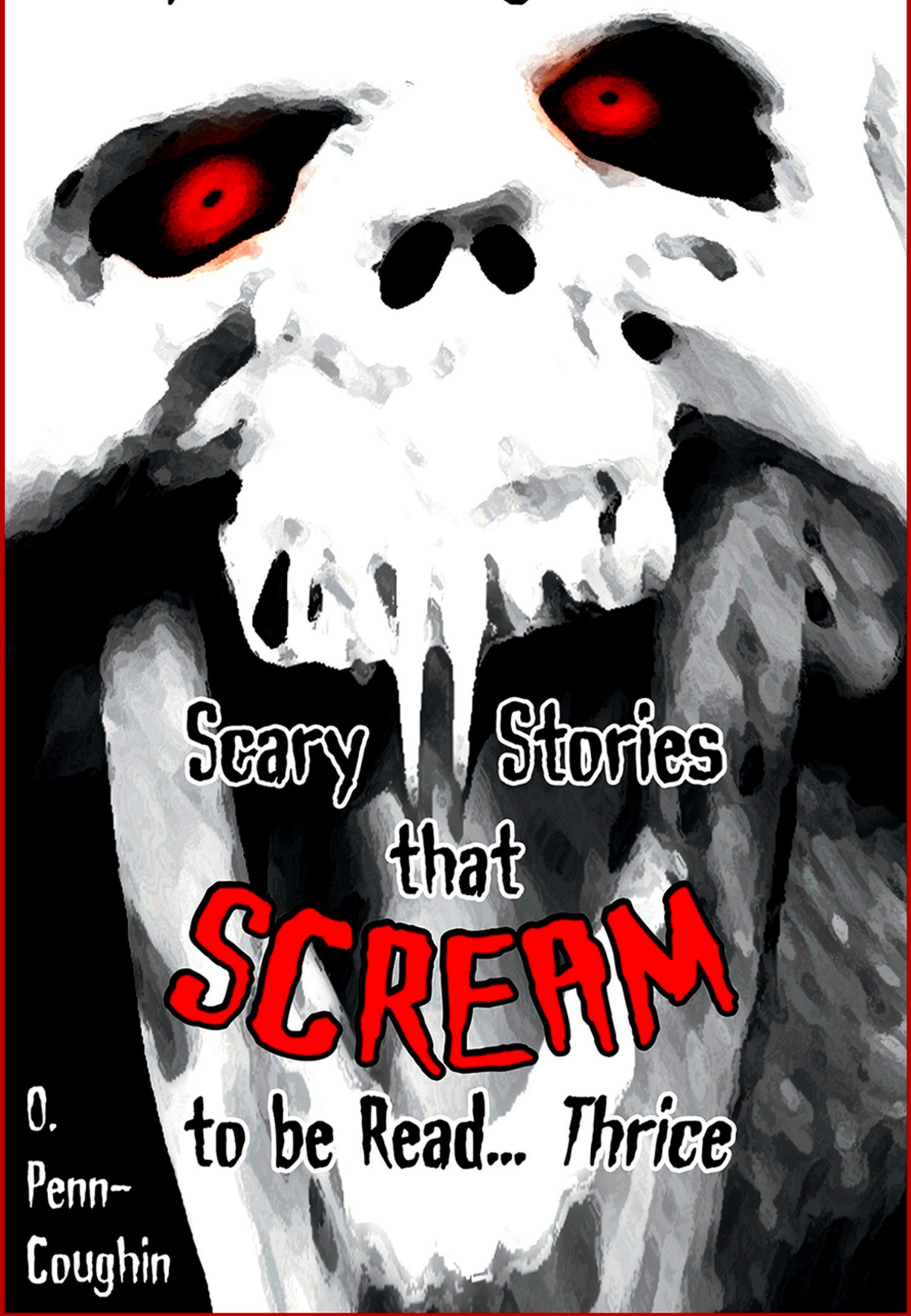
They're Coming For You 3



Scary Stories that SCREAM to be Read... Thrice

O. Penn-Coughin

They're Coming For You 3:
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… *Thrice*

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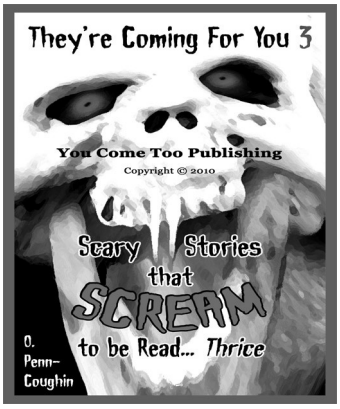

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Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Thrice
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For all the good teachers,
You are so outnumbered
and so gravely needed

*
*

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Introduction

The stories in this series are meant to be enjoyed alone or shared with others. If needed, some of them include instructions on when to scream. As always though, feel free to scream at any time. If you think it'll help. AAAAH!

O. Penn-Coughin

Going Down

The elevator doors opened and Louis stepped in. The only other passenger was a little old woman. She had a shawl pulled over her head and Louis couldn't see her face. But there was something familiar about her.

The elevator slowly made its way down, down, down to the lobby. Louis and the old woman rode in silence. When the metal box stopped, nothing happened. The doors didn't open. Louis waited patiently. In all his 58 years, he had never been scared of elevators or of tight spaces. But Louis was suddenly gripped with the feeling that he had to get out. He pushed the "open" button several times. Nothing happened.

Then Louis pushed all the buttons. Again, nothing happened. The old woman seemed untroubled.

"Come on," Louis said in a shaky voice. "Come on."

He began pounding on the doors.

"Get me out of here!" he shouted as the doors continued to remain closed.

The old woman then reached over with a trembling, bony hand and pressed the button that read "basement." The elevator began to move. A few moments later the basement light lit up. But the elevator did not stop. It kept moving. Louis could feel it dropping down, down, down.

"We've reached the bottom," Louis shouted. "How could we still be going down?"

"Oh, we're not at the bottom quite yet, Louis," the old woman said.

Louis knew that voice. He grabbed the old woman and spun her around to see her face.

It was the face of his dead mother. Her small eyes danced with evil.

"I was a bad mother and you were a bad son," she whispered horribly. "I've arranged it so that we can spend more time together. Now we'll have all the time in the world. All the time in the wooooooorld."

Louis dropped to his knees and cried and the elevator kept going down, down, down…

The Geek
Shall Inherit the Earth

"Hey, Tomato Head, good weekend?" Cameron yelled as Jen passed by on Monday morning. His friends, who were gathered around waiting for the bell to ring, all laughed.

For Jen Andrews, life had become as gloomy as the cold, wet winter that surrounded her each morning on the way to school. Nothing was going right. Her best friend had moved away. She kept getting bad grades on her math tests. And she started wearing large red-rimmed glasses that felt strange on her face.

Then, of course, there was Cameron: a mean, skinny fifth grader who took great delight in tormenting quiet and scared fourth graders every day before and after school. Lately, Jen had become one of his favorite targets.

"Hey, Bubble Butt, I'm talking to you!" he yelled.

Nothing ever stopped Cameron either. It seemed like the more teachers made him stay in for recess for "rude behavior," the more he lashed out, seeking revenge on whoever had spilled their guts.

One gray morning, Jen felt worse and worse as she walked to school. She kept thinking of all the bad stuff that was going on and couldn't think of any solutions. As she crossed the street, she felt a darkness start to grow inside her stomach. By the time she got to school, the strange feeling had spread throughout her entire body.

The new feeling was so powerful that as she rounded the corner and saw Cameron, all freckles and smirks, she didn't look to the ground like she usually did. She stared right into Cameron's mean eyes.

"Hey, Tomato Head. What's for lunch?"

Jen kept staring until Cameron looked away.

Strange, Jen thought. He usually bugs me until I get to class.

All day long Jen noticed that things seemed different. She didn't know what it was, but she liked how strong and brave she felt. She played soccer at recess and scored a goal. And in math, she finally learned how to divide. It was a great day!

But there was Cameron waiting for her on the sidewalk after school.

"Hey, Big Butt, wait up," he screeched, jogging over to her.

He was by himself.

"They'll have to fit your butt with glasses too so it can see where it's going," he said.

But surprisingly, Cameron's words had no effect on her like they usually did. They just rolled out of his mouth and fell to the ground. Inside, she just felt different. She

stared at him, stared for a long time, saying nothing. She was so focused that she barely noticed that he had started crying.

"What did you do to me?" he screamed at her. "What did you do?"

As Cameron ran away down the street, Jen noticed that his own butt now seemed huge—far too big for his ripped pants.

She wasn't sure what was happening.

But she had a powerful feeling it was going to be a good year.

Cooked Goose

Dave was trying to drive while at the same time talking on the phone, drinking his gingerbread latte coffee, and switching the radio station.

He never saw the goose cross the road.

A moment later he heard the thud.

"What was that?" he said. "No, not you, Larry. Let me call you back."

He stopped his car and got out. There it was in the middle of the street, feathers and blood all over the place. Somehow the goose was still alive. But it didn't take a veterinarian to know it wasn't going to make it.

Dave didn't want the animal to suffer any more than it already had. He grabbed it around the head and gave a good twist. He had intended to snap its neck, but he used a little too much force. The head came off in his hand, more blood shooting up from the neck.

"Ah, man," Dave said. "What a mess."

Now he felt doubly bad. He thought that he should do something, maybe give the goose a proper burial. But he didn't want to stain his trunk.

He went back to the car and got the coffee cup. He gulped down what was left. Then he took off the lid and placed the head inside.

"I hope you understand," he said, first looking down at the head and then at the body. "Both of you."

He got back in the car, placed the cup in the holder, and drove off.

He buried the head in a corner of the backyard where the cats liked to do their business. He said a few words.

That night Dave had a nightmare.

In the dream the goose was angry.

"That was wrong," it hissed. "Wrong."

Dave then felt a terrible stretching sensation around his neck.

In the morning Dave woke and the first thing that he saw was the goose head on the pillow by his head. It had the same angry expression from the nightmare.

"You again," Dave said. "You're becoming a real pain in the neck."

He reached up to rub the soreness above his shoulders but couldn't. He tried again. Again, nothing happened. He just couldn't reach his neck.

"Wait a minute," Dave said. "What's going on here?"

He then looked down. An expression of pure horror covered his face. The scream got stuck in his throat.

His body was gone. It wasn't on the bed. It wasn't anywhere. Dave was just a head!

Just like the goose next to him, he was just a head!

AAAAH!

Werewithal

The bear appeared on the far shore. It stood there, untroubled by the pouring rain, eating from a shrub at the river's edge. Ethan and his dad didn't say a word. They just watched in awe.

Suddenly a motor boat came into view. The roar of the rapids drowned out the noise of its engine. While one man steered the little skiff through the turbulent and rocky waters, the one near the bow stood and raised a rifle. He had the bear in his sights.

"Noooo!" Ethan shouted over the sound of the water.

The bear moved and then a shot rang out. And another. The bear became a blur, disappearing into the thick, wet forest.

The boat made its way over to them.

"How-dee," the helmsman said. "What brings you this way?"

"On vacation," Ethan's dad said.

The rifleman nodded slowly, glaring at Ethan, the weapon still in his hands. The two men looked dirty. It was easy to look dirty out in the wilderness, but this was the kind of dirty that didn't wash off with soap, Ethan thought.

"Well, we'll get the next one, sonny," the shooter said, grinning with white, sharp, perfect teeth. His eyes, though, seemed to glow with a hatred that shot deep into Ethan's soul.

"Don't lose any sleep over dat."

They both gave another half-hearted farewell nod and the boat continued upriver. Ethan and his father stood there in the mud and rain watching it until it disappeared.

“Those guys were kinda creepy,” Ethan said. “The rifle seemed to be the least scary thing about them.”

“I know what you mean,” his dad said. “Well, come on. We have a couple more big rapids to portage around today.”

While his dad lifted their green canoe over his head, Ethan shouldered the heavy backpack. He bent down to pick up the paddles. As they walked down the muddy trail, he replayed the incident in his mind. He worried about the next bear the hunters would meet.

***

That night Ethan had a nightmare. In the dream the hunters had turned into werewolves. Shapeshifting werewolves.

***

In the morning Ethan poked his head out the tent. Two loons swam on the foggy lake. Frost covered the ground. But as he stumbled outside, something else caught his eye.

There, right in front of their tent, was a bird head. The severed head of a large bird, maybe a falcon. The sight of it sent a chill down Ethan’s spine that had nothing to do with the low temperature.

“Do you think it was those guys?” Ethan asked.

“I don’t know what to think,” his dad said sounding a little nervous.

“Man, I had a nasty nightmare last night,” Ethan said. “And now this.”

“I had one too,” his dad said. “What was yours about?”

“Those hunters had turned into—”

“Shapeshifting werewolves?” his dad said, finishing the sentence.

“How could you know that?” Ethan said.

“Because I had the same dream,” his dad answered. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

***

It wasn’t supposed to be the last day of their ten-day Saskatchewan trip, but neither one of them wanted to stay out here one moment longer than necessary, certainly not another night.

They were still about 25 miles away from their car. It would be a long day, but it could be done.

By mid afternoon they reached Nipew Lake. The lake took its name, meaning dead in Cree, from a smallpox epidemic that swept through the area in the late 1700s. The wind had picked up like it usually did at that time of day. Small whitecaps already blanketed the water. Normally these were the types of conditions that would cause his dad to start looking for a campsite or at least a place to wait it out.

“It’s blowing against us,” his dad said. “But it’s nothing we haven’t done before.”

They both knew that if the wind got strong enough, it could transform a big lake like this into a raging cauldron. An open canoe would have no chance. They would swamp for sure. His dad always made Ethan wear his life vest. This time he did too. They shoved off.

It was always safer to hug the shore when out on a large body of water, but since the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, they paddled down the middle of the lake, sometimes finding themselves almost a mile from the nearest shore.

After a while Ethan turned around to look behind them. In the distant shadows of the forest, he thought he caught a glimpse of a pair of eyes. They glowed in the dark just like the bear hunter's had. Ethan shuddered with fright and drew in a long, uneven breath like a scared little boy.

The wind began to rage and howl, and at some point Ethan started hearing voices.

"It's no use," they said. "No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

Ethan tried to convince himself that it was the wind playing tricks on him. He focused on the job at hand as best he could, but there was true horror in the sound and in his heart.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

Larger and larger waves washed over the bow with increasing frequency, the cold water taking Ethan's breath away. The canoe—heavy from the water it was taking on—rode lower and lower in the growing waves.

It seemed impossible that they could hold on much longer.

Yet somehow they did. They paddled like this for what seemed like an hour. Finally, the trees and rock shelves on the far shore began to get more defined. Closer. A little closer with every stroke. Relief washed over them and they began to talk again.

"We just might make it," his dad said. "If you don't sink us with the weight of all your pee."

"Have some," Ethan shouted back as he cupped a handful of water from the bottom of the canoe, flipping it over his shoulder.

A few more short portages and a few more miles on the river and they were at the car.

***

The sun had gone down by the time they made it to their Jeep. The little parking lot was dark and quiet. Ethan's dad put his palm over the hood and bowed his head. Ethan just smiled.

He loaded the gear into the back of the SUV while his father strapped the canoe to the roof. The car rocked as he pulled hard on the lines. They were soon on the dirt road that would take them to the paved road that would take them to civilization.

Ethan began to think about the trip and then stopped. He heard something. The voices were back.

"It's no use," they said again. "No use, little boy, no uuuse—"

Suddenly there was a loud exploding pop and the car jerked to the left. Ethan jumped off the seat. His father pulled the car to the side of the road.

"That was kind of scary, huh?" he said, sighing deeply. "I think we've got a flat."

They got out to look at the damage. It was moonless and hard to see, no end of stars filling the cold sky.

As they got busy digging in the back for a flashlight and the spare and the jack, a car pulled up behind them. It had its lights off.

Two men got out.

Cold, sweaty fingers of fear clutched Ethan's throat. He fought to breathe. It had to be the hunters. They walked toward the Jeep. Through the dark Ethan could make out that they didn't have rifles.

Maybe it's someone else, Ethan thought hopefully. At least it's not a full moon.

And then Ethan saw those eyes again, cutting through the dark, coming closer. The men both smiled, their long, white teeth biting into the darkness.

A moment later they were on top of his father.

"Run, Ethan, run!" was the last thing he heard his dad say.

Terrible screams and inhuman shrieks ripped through the night as Ethan ran through the forest.

Ethan ran and ran and ran until all he could hear was the beating of his own heart pounding in his ears. He finally stopped and stood still for a long time. Tears rolled down his cheeks onto the forest floor. It was now as dark and quiet as death.

Suddenly Ethan heard footsteps coming his way.

"Ethan?" a voice whispered. "Ethan."

It was his father.

"Dad," Ethan said, overcome with emotion. "How did you get away?"

His dad stepped closer and snarled, "I didn't."

It was one of the things.

Ethan took off running again. And again he heard the voices, closing in.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse."

Ethan was more certain at that moment than at any other time in his life. He was sure the voices were right. It was no use.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

He kept running anyway.

[Start breathing hard, pause, breathe some more, and then… SCREAM!]

Harry Potter
Can Bite Me

Little Gregory Podder was sick of it. He just couldn't take it anymore.

Every other kid in school seemed to be calling him "Harry Potter." His favorite teacher had done it, and now his best friend John was even doing it.

It was "Harry Potter" this and "Harry Potter" that.

"Here comes Harry Potter" and "There goes Harry Potter."

"What's up, Harry Potter?" and "I love your new movie, Harry Potter."

It didn't do any good to explain that his first name was Greg not Harry and that his last name was spelled with two *d*'s not two *t*'s. And it sure didn't matter that he didn't want to be called Harry Potter. Those things were beside the point.

The point seemed to be that people were just plain stupid and that any excuse was good enough to keep saying, "Harry Potter, Harry Potter, Harry Potter!"

"I wish I were a vampire," Little Gregory Podder finally said one day. "I would bite them till they stopped."

But wishing wasn't going to do squat. What was needed was some research and some action.

How do I become a vampire? Little Gregory Podder asked himself. How do I become a vampire?

He googled it when he got home.

A lot of nonsense came up like usual. There were no end of websites and articles on the subject. There was even a vampire academy that charged $666. It was all nonsense.

"This is a huge waste of time," he said out loud.

But as he was staring at the screen and thinking how his life really sucked, Little Gregory Podder saw a tiny ad on the lower right hand corner.

It read, "Real Live Vampire for Hire: $99 a night."

Little Gregory Podder dialed the number. A gravelly-voiced man answered.

Little Gregory Podder explained the situation.

"You're breaking my heart, kid," the man said in a New York accent. "But what do you need done?"

"I need it to stop," Little Gregory Podder said. "I just need it to stop."

"Yeah, I get that, but it's not as simple as that," the man said. "You have to be more specific, such as 'Bite so-and-so or scare the living daylights out of Joe Blow or Suzi Quatro.'"

"I don't know Suzi Quatro and I guess I don't really want to hurt anyone," Little Gregory Podder said.

"I know," the man said. "You just want it to stop."

"Yeah," Little Gregory Podder said. "How about if you come to Back-to-School Night and just talk to them?"

"Talk to them?" the man said. "Well, it's your money, kid."

On Back-to-School Night the vampire waited outside the school. He was a short round man with hardly any hair.

Little Gregory Podder walked up to him.

"Are you the vampire?" he asked.

"That's me, kid," the vampire said. "You got the money?"

Little Gregory Podder handed over the $99.

"By the way, I don't think being called Harry is all that bad," the vampire said rubbing his scalp.

Everyone gathered in the gym and the principal said a few words. Just not few enough.

"Remember to support our yo-yo cookie dough sale," she said. "We're trying to raise money to buy new band uniforms. And now you are free to visit your child's—"

At that moment the vampire flew on stage and took the microphone.

“Yeah, whatever you do, don’t forget to support that yo-yo cookie dough sale,” he said. “Oh, allow me to introduce myself. I am Joe the Vampire. I was invited here by Gregory Podder.”

Joe the Vampire proceeded to do a series of card, yo-yo, and magic tricks that wowed the crowd. The closing number just about brought the house down. He sawed the principal in half and pulled cookie dough from her stomach, throwing chucks of it out into the audience.

Everyone stood and cheered.

“That was just the best!” the principal said, pulling herself together. “Thank you so much for making this possible, Greg.”

“Gre-gor-y!” the crowd started chanting. “Gre-gor-y!”

“Oh, one more thing,” Joe the Vampire said. “Greg would really appreciate you not calling him Harry Potter anymore. I came here today to ask you nice. Next time I might not be so nice. Thanks and good night.”

The crowd cheered again and again chanted, “Gre-gor-y! Gre-gor-y! Gre-gor-y!”

“Hey, kid,” Joe the Vampire said to Little Gregory Podder after it was over. “You wanna go see a movie?”

“That sounds cool,” Little Gregory Podder said. “What do you want to see?”

“I think that new Harry Potter movie is still playing,” Joe the Vampire said. “I just love me some Harry Potter. Don’t you?”

At that moment Little Gregory Podder turned as green as Frankenstein.

“Just pulling your leg, kid,” Joe the Vampire said. “I’m an RPat man all the way.”

Hold the Pepperoni,
For We are Many

The two boys had been fishing at Devil’s Lake all day without anything to show for it.

“Let’s try that spot under those cliffs,” Matthew said. “Fish like the shade.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Luke said, sighing deeply as he started the boat motor.

A few minutes later they had their lines in the dark water. Half an hour went by. The fish were just not cooperating.

Suddenly there was a thunderous rumbling from the cliffs. It sounded like lightning or a stampede of buffalo. Moments later a huge cloud of dust rose in the sky. The boys put down their poles and looked up. And then they saw it.

An animal flew off the edge of the cliff. It was at least 100 feet down to the water. The animal dropped awkwardly through the air.

"Look!" Matthew said, pointing.

More followed. In an instant the sky was full. There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them.

"They're pigs," Luke said, not believing what he was seeing. "Pigs!"

The pigs started hitting the water with incredible thuds. Great sprays of water shot in the air. The majority of the animals splashed down near the shore, but some of them landed just a few feet away from the boat.

"This is insane," Matthew said. "What could have gotten into them?"

"Let's see how many we can rescue," Luke said.

He motored over to a group of three pigs that were swimming toward them.

***

"Look, there's a boat coming toward us," the blue-eyed pig said. "Act helpless when they get closer."

"I've got the one in the back," the second pig said.

"I'll take the other one," the first pig said.

"Hey, what about me?" the third pig said. "I didn't survive that fall for you two to leave me here in this Satan-forsaken lake."

"Don't worry," the second one said. "There's plenty of room inside that chubby kid for both of us."

***

It took a great effort, but the boys managed to pull the pigs on board. With the extra weight, the boat now sat low in the water.

"Man, that was work right there," Matthew said, breathing hard. "But they seem to be in pretty good shape."

"Yeah," Luke said, wiping the sweat off his face. "Hey, look at the way that one is staring at you. I think it's in love."

"Yo mama's in lo—" Matthew began to say and then stopped.

He felt strange. He wasn't himself anymore. Then he felt nothing. His brown eyes turned blue.

"What's the matter?" Luke said.

Matthew didn't answer.

A moment later something took control of Luke. Something evil. No, it wasn't one thing. It was two.

The boys threw the pigs back in the water, smiled at each other fiendishly, and headed back to town.

The Phone Call

Dudley Pointer wasn't crazy.

But others thought he was. Ever since his wife had died, people had thought he'd gone off the deep end.

Sure, sometimes he liked to go swimming in the city fountains. The police kept telling him that he couldn't do that, but it was hot out. What did they expect?

Or sometimes Dudley would get upset at the bistro where he ate lunch everyday when they didn't properly cook the food he ordered. It was all those germs, you see. If you didn't cook something through, you could get sick and die. They didn't seem to understand that, though. He had to keep telling them.

Then one day, a few months after his wife's death, their son Jonathan came to see him. Along with a man dressed in a white lab coat.

"Pop, they're going to take care of you there. They'll make sure you get the help you need," Jonathan said as they dragged Dudley out of his apartment building and put him into a big black car. "Don't worry, you'll be okay."

But okay Dudley wasn't. The Linda Vista Hospital for the Mentally Ill was no vacation. As Dudley found out, the people there were actually insane. Not just eccentric like himself. These people were mental. Some had actually killed people, and others were really violent. The halls of Linda Vista were always filled with screaming.

It didn't take long for Dudley to realize that he needed to get out of there. Aside from the crazy patients, there were the doctors and nurses that fed him no end of pills to keep him calm. The drugs made Dudley's world gray and hazy.

And if people refused to take the pills, there were worse things they would do. Terrible things.

Dudley needed to get out. And soon, before the place actually made him crazy. He'd already lost track of how long he'd been there. He came up with a plan.

One night, when the screams had finally died down and the halls were empty of nurses, Dudley tiptoed out of his room. He walked down the hallway to the security guard's station.

Just like he had noticed on other evenings, Ralph was in his seat, snoring. Dudley quietly lifted the keys attached to the belt loop without waking him up. He walked down a side hallway, opening the metal door to the stairs with one of the keys.

He could almost taste his freedom.

Dudley ran down another hallway and could then see the parking lot from a glass door. He pushed against the door, but it was locked. Dudley quickly searched through the keys on the key ring, looking for the right one. He tried them all, but none of them opened the door.

He was so close.

And then the building's alarms went off. They must have noticed him missing. Dudley's time was just about up.

He suddenly noticed a phone hanging from the wall in the hallway. A thought came to him. If he couldn't get out of this insane asylum on his own, maybe he could reason with his son. If Jonathan only knew the terrible things that went on in this place, he'd have to get him out.

Dudley threw the keys down and picked up the phone. He dialed Jonathan's number quickly, glancing over his shoulder to see if they were coming.

It rang a few times until finally Dudley heard his son's voice on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Johnny, it's your father. Listen, you have to help me get out of this place."

"Hello? Who is this?"

"It's me, your father. I don't have much time, you have to help me. They do terrible things in here. I'm not crazy, Johnny! You have to get me out of here!" Dudley yelled into the phone.

He heard footsteps running toward him.

There was silence on the other end.

"Johnny, help me! Get me out of this—"

And then they grabbed Dudley. His screams echoed through the hospital as they dragged him away.

"I don't belong here! I don't belong here! I don't belong here!"

***

Jonathan Pointer hung up the phone. It was the third time in two weeks that he'd gotten a call like this. He'd answer, and there'd only be static on the other end. The number that showed up on the caller ID was always the same. He traced it once.

The operator said the calls were coming from inside the building where the Linda Vista hospital had stood before they tore it down all those years ago.

Jonathan didn't regret committing his father. He'd had to. Dudley Pointer had become a violent man after Jonathan's mother died. He had snapped, and Jonathan knew he needed help.

But he still felt guilty, even today, over the way his father died as he tried to escape from Linda Vista. Dudley had beaten up and nearly killed a security guard to get the keys to the place. He had been shot just as he was trying to leave through the south entrance out into the parking lot.

That had been more than forty years ago.

Small Room

Perhaps it was the challenge of it. The young couple had never seen such an old house and they were intrigued by its mystery and character. It had dark wood floors that sucked all the light up, windows that were broken, and walls that were covered with peeling paint. It would be quite the job to fix it up, but they were excited and had a vision. And at such a great low price, how could they afford not to buy it?

They moved in and got to work. They decided to begin downstairs in the living room and dining room. Also, they would organize the small room at the end of the hall and make it into an office.

Two months later, the living room and dining room were finished and looked beautiful. The walls had been painted and bright new wood floors had been installed. They were very proud.

They decided to split up to make things go faster. Jane would finish the small room while Bob worked upstairs.

Bob had scraped off all the old paint in the master bedroom before he began to wonder how Jane was doing. It was odd that she wasn't playing any music like she usually did.

"How's it going down there?" Bob called out.

There was no answer.

"Jane?"

Still no answer. Bob went downstairs and walked to the small room. The door was closed. He tried to push it open, but something was in the way. That's when he realized that it was Jane.

"Jane!" he yelled.

He squeezed into the room, and found her lying unconscious on the floor. He grabbed her and gently slapped her face. When she came to, she couldn't remember what had happened.

"Did you hit your head on something? Are you okay? Did you fall off the chair?" Bob asked, Jane just shook her head.

"I don't remember anything," she said as he helped her walk over to the kitchen table. She sat down in a chair while he got her some water.

"I just remember that I was arranging boxes of books, and having a strange feeling, like somebody was watching me."

When Bob heard this, he made a thorough inspection of the house, checking all the rooms and doors. He checked their valuables. There was no evidence of a break-in. Bob didn't know what to make of it.

"I think we should stay out of that room," Jane said.

"You must have slipped off a chair and hit your head," he said.

"We shouldn't go in there anymore!" Jane said.

Bob thought about it for a moment. Jane wasn't thinking too clearly. They had just bought the house and now she wanted to close up this room forever.

"Let's do this. I'll finish up in there, and you work in our bedroom," he said.

At the end of the day, Bob met Jane upstairs.

"Did you finish?" she asked.

"Yes, it looks good," he said.

Jane didn't go in to see it. She wasn't ever going to go into that room again.

Over the next few days, Bob began to act strangely. He seemed grumpy and upset, even though he declared that nothing was wrong. Jane became worried. She had never seen this side of Bob and wondered if he had been working too hard on the house. He was mean, saying things that she thought he would never say. His eyes looked strange too and he never seemed to sleep or bathe anymore.

"Nag, nag, nag!" he yelled, after she asked him to change the light bulb in the bathroom. "I've married an annoying old hag!"

When they were painting the spare room upstairs, he seemed in an especially foul mood. Jane decided to work in the kitchen for a little while.

"Make me a sandwich while you're down there!" he said in an angry voice. "I'm starving!"

"All right," she said.

Jane thought about Bob as she made lunch. He sure had changed. Maybe it was just the pressure of fixing up this house.

Suddenly, she remembered the mortgage. She wasn't sure if Bob had paid it. That would be terrible if they had forgotten. She had last seen the checkbook next to the computer in the office, right before she fainted.

She would have to ask Bob to go into the office and get it and she sure wasn't looking forward to that. He would yell at her for sure. Just as she started heading upstairs, she put down the plate.

"I'm just going to get it myself," she said out loud. "I'll just have to be brave. Beats dealing with him."

She crept down the long hallway and opened the door. A terrible odor rushed up, making her gag and almost vomit, like a rat had died in there. She flipped on the light. In the corner was Bob, dead—very dead—with flies buzzing around his rotting corpse. It looked like he had been there for a while.

"Oh, my God!" Jane whispered, backing out of the room. She started to let out a scream, but held her hand to her mouth.

"Where's my freakin' sandwich!" Bob suddenly yelled from upstairs. "Oh, never mind! I'll be down there in a minute!"

All the Pretty Zombies

Zach Seborhea was the world's first ever zombie scientist. He was a zombie. And he was a scientist. He was a zombie scientist.

"Zombies are at a distinct disadvantage in today's monster-friendly society," he said one day. "Their brains are toast and they're butt ugly."

"I can't do anything about the first one, but I have an idea on how to make us better looking."

So Zach Seborhea began working on a formula to make zombies pretty. First he experimented on zombie mice. After countless failed attempts, he finally came up with a cream that made the mice extremely handsome. But then they died.

"I think their fried zombie mice minds couldn't stand the shock of the transformation," he said to his assistant. "I'll just have to try it out on myself."

Zach Seborhea applied the cream to his butt-ugly face.

"What the heck," he said, rubbing some on his face-ugly butt as well.

At first nothing happened. Then he felt a terrible burning. And then…

"You look so pretty, master," he heard his assistant say. "Make now me pretty too."

He had done it! He had done it!

He soon opened "Zach Seborhea's Zombie Beauty College."

Zombies lined up around the block waiting for their jars of "Zach Seborhea's Pretty Zombie Cream."

After that, it didn't take long for zombies to take over the world. There wasn't even a war. Vampires didn't stand a chance. Sure, they were still smarter, but they no longer were the prettiest monsters in town. And that made all the difference.

The bodies started piling up. Wooden stakes and garlic powder had nothing to do with it. The vampires were dying of natural causes.

They were dying of broken hearts. Their girlfriends had all left them for those pretty tuxedo-wearing zombies.

Booey, hooey, hooey…

Field Trip

We stood around the giant tombstone. Nobody was bored and nobody was talking.

Julio knocked me in the side with his elbow.

"This is some strange field trip," he said.

The tombstone was standing upright on a table and a man was holding a hose that blasted sand into the granite slab, engraving it. Julio was right. Mrs. Jones had sure topped herself this time: tombstone artist. Now that's a career.

"It's important to know the different career choices available to you," she had said at the beginning of the semester to our freshman class.

Soon the crazy field trips began. We went to a car dealership and the courthouse. Then to a bank, a bridal store, and an Italian restaurant. Now, at the beginning of spring, we stood in a large warehouse watching how tombstones were made.

The guy with the hose turned it off so our guide could speak.

"This one here is for Mrs. Edwards," he said.

The man had a huge gut and long, gray sideburns that looked freakish and was wearing a dirty blue apron.

"The sand is being blasted out at such a powerful force that it's able to cut through the thick granite. Granite is one of the strongest materials in our world, you know. This is the only way we can cut through it to engrave our product here."

In a few minutes the man had finished.

Edna Edwards
1919-2010
Beloved Wife, Mother, and Grandmother
In Our Hearts Forever
RIP

"Any questions?" asked Blue Apron.

Julio raised his hand.

"How much do these cost?" he asked.

"It's all included in the mortuary package," Blue Apron said, annoyed. "Who else?"

"Do you know how Edna Edwards died?" James asked.

"Well, yes we do, but we're not supposed to tell." Blue Apron said, looking around for our teacher.

Mrs. Jones was standing away from us all, reading something on her phone. He smiled and then whispered.

"Brain cancer. It just ate her brain away. Kind of like little bugs in there," he said, tapping his own skull.

"Okay, well, thank you," said Mrs. Jones. "Students, we need to move along. Tombstones aren't the only thing Michael's Engraving makes. Come on, out the door to the next building. Single file please."

I was last in line, waiting to move but it was taking forever.

Suddenly something touched my shoulder.

"What?" I said out loud, turning and expecting one of my friends. But nobody was there.

There was something breathing in my face. The smell was horrible, like rotting flesh.

"Dude, do you smell that?"

But Julio was way ahead of me and kept on walking, following the line out the door.

"Who's there?" I asked. I still heard the heavy breathing and then some words.

"Don't get on the bus."

It was an old woman's voice. I couldn't see her but she was right in front of me. Right there, breathing her foul breath into my face.

"Don't get on the bus, or you'll be in here with us!"

"What?" I said. "What are you talking about it?"

And suddenly that putrid smell disappeared. I ran, catching up to the rest of the line.

"That's a good one, " said Julio after I told him what had happened. We were sitting on a patch of grass outside eating our lunches. The sun felt good and I was glad to be out of that horrible warehouse. Had I imagined it all?

Afterwards, we visited the trophy room and then it was time to leave. I looked back at the tombstone warehouse and that's when I saw her, standing in a window on the second floor and looking right at me. She was wearing a flowing blue dress, her head full of blackness, blackness where her eyes and mouth should have been. A bony finger waved back and forth.

"Don't get on the bus, or you'll be in here with us!" I heard screaming inside my head, over and over again.

I took off running. I heard Mrs. Jones yelling behind me, but it just made me run faster. I couldn't help it. I ran and ran and ran as I thought about that rotting head full of black holes.

It was starting to get dark by the time I made it up to my front porch.

Mom met me at the door. I knew I'd be in trouble. But there was something more.

"Dave?" she said. She had been crying. Her face was red and swollen. Her eyes were tiny slits, pushed far back into her face.

"Sweetheart? Is that you?" She went up to me nervously and started poking me.

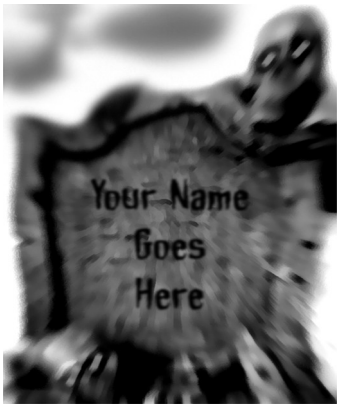
"Of course it's me," I said.

I was exhausted. I figured I had probably run at least 10 miles. I was hungry too.

Suddenly, she gave me a crazy hard hug, squeezing me tightly as she cried.

"We were sure you were in the river," she said. "But you've been saved! You've been saved!"

The bus had never made it back from the tombstone factory. As it crossed the river, it skidded off the bridge and plunged into the water. There were no survivors.



La Arrugada

Oh, good you are awake, my friend. We were about to start without you. How are you feeling? What are you in here for? What is your name?

You are right, Miguel. My apologies. So many questions. Where are my manners? Dear me, I fear that was another question.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Diego Cervantes. And that over there is Miguel Lavolpe. Miguel, as you can see, broke his leg. The doctor says he will be going home tomorrow. I am here because of, well, it is rather embarrassing. Diarrhea. I ate something that didn't agree with me three days ago and I haven't been able to stop going. I apologize in advance if I should wake you in the night with my noises.

In any case, Miguel and I like to tell stories to pass the time. Perhaps you would like to tell one of your own. Or simply listen.

I will go first.

This is the story of *La Arrugada*, The Wrinkled One.

No, Miguel, it is not about an old woman. Please, no more interruptions.

A very long time ago there was a young nurse who worked at this very hospital. Her name was Beatriz. She was a very good nurse, gentle and caring with her patients. She was the best nurse in the entire hospital. Beatriz did not perform miracles but her patients were the happiest patients in the hospital and many of them did get better, more so than the other nurses' patients.

The other nurses began to get jealous of this. And so they worked out an elaborate scheme to get even. They enlisted the assistance of a doctor at the hospital. He was very handsome.

The nurses started writing love letters to Beatriz from the doctor. With each letter, she became more and more intrigued and at some point fell in love with the doctor. She began writing back. Finally, the doctor asked Beatriz to meet him on the roof one night.

There was a beautiful full moon and it was warm.

¿*Qué*? Yes, Miguel, just like tonight. Now, please, let that be the last interruption.

"Oh, doctor," Beatriz said sweetly. "I love you too."

Suddenly all the nurses came out of the shadows and started laughing. The doctor laughed too.

"Did you enjoy our little joke?" they asked.

"Well, back to work everyone," the head nurse said.

After they all left, Beatriz walked over to the edge of the building. She stared at the street below. It was a long way down. She thought about jumping. She thought about it for a long time. Eventually, however, she stepped back from the abyss and returned to work.

But as the days went by, she became sadder and sadder. She lost interest in everything. Even in her patients. She began to show up to work late with a dirty, smelly, and very wrinkled uniform.

Beatriz was eventually fired. She never recovered from the cruel joke and died soon thereafter.

About a year later, rumors started spreading throughout the hospital that a ghost was roaming the halls late at night.

Some said it was Beatriz looking to take revenge on the other nurses. Others said she was looking for the doctor. Some said she looked and walked like a normal person, while others claimed she floated and glowed with a ghostly malice.

All the stories agreed, however, on two points. Beatriz was no longer gentle and caring. She had become evil, consumed with a burning hatred. And she still wore the terribly wrinkled uniform.

Sometimes an unfortunate patient would make the mistake of interrupting the ghost, this *fantasma*, from her mission. When someone would call out in the night for help, the ghost would sometimes appear. And she would be most displeased.

Patients suddenly started dying in the hospital. Not the ones in critical or grave condition either. The ones in good condition. Patients who had no business dying.

What's that? You are in pain? Oh, that is too bad. Que lastima. There is that switch by the side of the bed. Yes, that one. The nurse will soon come with your medication.

Allow me to return to our story. It will perhaps help take your mind off the pain.

Unfortunately, there is not much more to tell. It is just a story after all, but some of the more superstitious insist that the ghost of Beatriz is real and that she returns with the coming of the full moon.

Wait. What was that? Out in the hall. Did you hear it? Did you hear the words?

"Doctor, is it you? *Te quiero, mi amor*. I still love yooooooou…"

It must be her.

[Whisper] *Por el amor de Dios*, do not make a sound. God protect us. She is coming. Our only hope is to pretend we are asleep. It is she, *La Arrugada*. She has answered your call. The door is opening. Do you smell the filthy uniform? Oh, no. Do not look upon her face. It is twisted with hate. Oh, and the wrinkles. The horrible wrinkles.

Save yourselves. Save yoursel—

AAAAH!

Mine Your Own Business

It had been two weeks since that day down in the mine. Two weeks since 17 men lost their lives. His men. His friends. His fault.

No one spoke to Gerry MacMurray at the funerals. The wicked glares of the widows and the orphans said it all. It was his fault. He was responsible.

It had happened near the end of their shift. Gerry was in charge and he was pushing the men hard, trying to impress the boss man. Everything was going fine. And then the support beams gave way and the ceiling and the rocks crashed down on them. Death swallowed them whole. They never had a chance.

Gerry was the only survivor of the disaster. He came out of it with hardly a scratch. It seemed like a miracle. But in Gerry's empty heart, it felt more like a curse.

He went back down in the mine, working alone. The other miners didn't seem to want him around. They didn't even look at him, let alone talk to him. And who could blame them? He was bad news.

He pounded away at the rock all day long, throwing his rage into every swing of his pick. After work—alone, ignored, and cast out—Gerry wandered the streets of the sad, little town.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why?"

Days and days passed like this and there came a point when he could hardly remember anything in the before time. Then one afternoon right around quitting time, Gerry passed by the abandoned tunnel where the accident had happened. He saw a lantern light coming toward him from out of the shaft.

"Gerry," a voice called out.

It was Owen, his best friend.

"Gerry, you've got to let it go," Owen said. "And you've got to move on, boyo."

Owen then walked back down the tunnel.

Gerry dropped to the ground and started crying. He cried for a long time. When he looked up, what he saw almost made him scream. There, standing over him, were all the men who had died in the accident. Their terrible faces seemed to look right through Gerry.

"You cannot stay here," Owen said again. "You have to come with us."

The ghosts had come back to take their revenge! Gerry got up and started running.

"You're not real!" he screamed. "Not real!"

When Gerry finally stopped running, Owen was standing right there in front of him.

“We all died in that accident back there,” he said. “You too, boyo. You’ve been dead the whole time. Dead, dead, dead.”

Gerry was about to run again, but then he looked down at his hands. They were cold and gray—the hands of a dead man. He suddenly understood. And he wasn’t afraid anymore.

“It’s time to accept it,” Owen said, putting an arm around Gerry’s shoulder. “It’s time to go home.”

The Elemental

Noah was so bored. So very, very bored.

He had been dragged around Ireland by his parents for a week now, and they acted like it was the most interesting place in the world. They’d listen to tour guides, who made no sense with their wild accents, and then they would say something like, “Well, isn’t that fascinating!”

It all made Noah want to barf. This was not his idea of summer vacation fun.

But then, on the ninth day of the trip, his luck started changing.

They visited a place called Castle Leap that was supposed to be haunted. As they got off the tour bus, he looked up at the towering, decaying stone building, and couldn’t wait to get inside.

Noah had always wanted to go somewhere haunted. He loved all those ghost hunting shows on TV, and even tried to be a ghost hunter himself once at an empty haunted house down the street. Now was his chance for a real live ghostly encounter. He was even carrying his dad’s video camera.

It was easy to give his parents the slip once they got inside. The tour was packed with people, and the castle was huge. Noah followed a long stone corridor to a staircase that led upstairs. He started filming.

“Here we are at Leap Castle, where it is said that 500 years ago the prince of the castle killed his own brother to rise to power,” Noah said. “Since then, the castle has become a hatching ground for disembodied voices and ghostly sightings.”

Noah reached the top of the stairs and followed another empty hallway. He turned the camera on himself, looking into the lens.

“Now, I’m going to try to use provocation to get the spirits to respond,” Noah said. “Are you the ghost of the prince who was murdered? Are you angry?”

He watched the hallway through the LCD screen. He heard nothing and saw nothing. Noah sighed. The problem was that it was broad daylight and he knew that no ghost in its

right mind would show up. If only he could come back when it was dark. But his parents were leaving after the tour, and he would never get to see the castle at night.

But there had to be some areas that were completely dark—it was a castle after all. Noah stopped filming, and went searching.

After walking past several rooms and down more hallways, he found something. It was a small wooden door. He opened it and was pleased to see that inside was a very dark stairwell that led down. A metal chain was strung across the doorway with a sign that read "KEEP OUT: Staff Only."

This would be perfect.

Noah had never let signs stop him before. And as he knew from watching every episode of Ghost Adventures twice, Zak Bagans didn't let signs stop him either. He threw his legs over the metal chain and pulled the door over, leaving it open just a crack. Now it was pitch black, just like he needed. He turned on the camera.

"Are you the ghost of the dead brother? Are you looking for revenge?" Noah asked, slowly walking down the stairs. "Well, I'm right here for ya, if you're looking for someone to take your anger out on."

This was a strategy the TV ghost hunters used sometimes to get the ghost to appear. Getting them angry would help them manifest.

"Oh, my GOD, I just heard a noise!" Noah said into the camera. "Are you serious right now? Dude…"

He pointed the camera back up at the door.

"That was nuts. I can't bleepin' believe that just happened. There is definitely something in the room with me now," he said.

"I'm getting chills," he lied.

He turned the camera on his own face, dropping his mouth in shock. He was overacting, just like Zak.

"If you're looking for revenge, why don't you just go ahead and push me? Show me that you're here," he yelled.

There was only silence.

He slowly walked down the stairs as he filmed. He saw nothing, but suddenly he smelled something. It was horrible, like the smell of rotten eggs, or a massive loss of intestinal control.

"Whew, it's really beginning to stink in here, guys," Noah said. "Looks like the brother's lost control of his bowels in death."

Noah had almost made it to a landing when he heard a real noise behind him. He turned the camera back up at the door. Suddenly he heard the small door above slam shut. A real chill slid down his body.

"Do you have something you want to say to me?" he yelled, his voice cracking a little.

Just as he was talking into the camera, he glanced back up at the door and saw something move. He quickly aimed the camera up and in the screen, he saw a tall black, hooded figure towering at the top of the stairs. The smell of rotten eggs suddenly got stronger.

"Oh, my GOD!" Noah yelled, except this time there was real terror in his voice.

He ran down to the landing and was relieved to find another door. It was to another room. With the light from the camera, he could see that it had stone walls and floors. Chains were bolted to the walls.

There was something on the ground in the corner. Noah walked over and slowly realized what it was. Cameras! The remains of dozens and dozens of cameras, ripped to shreds!

"Oh, my—" Noah said, never finishing the last word. He tried to scream, but it was no use.

***

Meanwhile, back on the tour, Noah's parents were enjoying the tour guide's candor about the spirits said to haunt Castle Leap. Of course, he said, the guidebooks wrote about the murdered prince who haunted the grounds. But there was something else that inhabited the castle: a malevolent entity that caused people to get hurt. It was said that the Elemental, as it was called, lived in a small dungeon at the bottom of the castle.

"Don't ya worry, folks, we never take groups down there," the tour guide said, laughing. "Besides, you'll know he's around. People say that whenever The Elemental is present, the room reeks of sulfur. Can't miss that!"

Aerial Burial

The trail seemed to go on forever.

"Dad, when are we going to be there?" Sally moaned.

"It has been a long day," her mom said, straining from the weight of her backpack.

"Any minute now, you two," Bill Burtleson answered.

The truth was they should have been at the lake by now. They had to be close he told himself.

It seemed like just a little while ago the sun was high in the sky, and even though the forest was dense with trees and brush, it had been bright compared to how it was now. Now, the light was quickly disappearing, and the forest had turned into dark gray twilight.

Soon it would be too dark to keep going, and they would have to give up trying to get to a good campsite along the secluded mountain lake described in the guidebook.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do,” Bill said. “You two can leave your packs here and when we reach the lake, Bill Jr. and I will come back and get the packs while you set up the tent.”

“Deal,” Moira Burtleson said, dropping her pack in the middle of the trail. Sally dumped hers next to it.

That helped them go a little faster at first, but after half an hour they still hadn’t reached the lake. Dark gray was quickly turning into sinister black.

“We’re going to have to camp around here somewhere,” Bill said, feeling foolish. “Let’s find a flat spot for the tent.”

They wandered off the trail for a few minutes.

“This doesn’t look so bad here,” Moira said. “We’ll spruce it up and have dinner ready by the time you get back.”

“All right, Bill Jr.,” Bill said. “Let’s go back for those packs.”

“Dad, can I go instead?” Sally said.

“I thought you were tired,” her dad said.

“I feel a lot better,” she said.

“Okay, I don’t think Bill Jr. will mind,” her dad said.

“Suits me just fine,” Bill Jr. said.

Bill pulled out the flashlights and handed them out. Then they headed off.

“It’s kind of scary out here,” Sally said after a while.

She’s right, Bill thought.

He started talking to get their minds off the creepiness of the black forest.

“You know, I think there’s an old Native American burial ground around here somewhere,” he said at some point.

He began to regret having said it, but Sally didn’t seem scared. In fact, she started asking about it.

Bill went on to explain how some tribes used to hang their dead up in the trees instead of burying them. Sometimes the bodies were placed on simple platforms. In some cases, a canoe might be built and stuck up in the trees with the corpse of a chief inside.

“That’s pretty cool,” Sally said.

It wasn’t much longer before they found the backpacks and started heading back.

“Boy, I’m starving,” Bill said. “How ‘bout you?”

“Me too,” Sally said.

After a while, she started thinking about the burial ground. She began to think about which way the dead bodies faced and how they looked. She wondered whether pieces of rotting flesh would tumble down from the trees when the corpses decomposed.

Soon Sally was too scared to look up at the trees. She kept her eyes glued to the small spot of ground illuminated by her flashlight.

“I think we’ve gone too far,” her dad said. “I should have marked the spot where we left the trail.”

“Not cool, Dad,” Sally said. “Not cool.”

They turned back down the trail.

“I hope they have a fire going,” Bill said. “It’ll make it easier to find them.”

They stumbled back up and down the trail several more times. At some point Sally thought she heard distant chanting and drumming coming through the trees.

“There!” her dad finally shouted.

Sally looked up and saw the beam of his flashlight bouncing against the walls of their bright yellow tent. They had made it!

"I guess they weren't able to build a fire," Bill sighed. "I'll get one going in no time."

Sally unzipped the tent and poked her head inside. There was no one there.

"Where'd they go?" she said.

"Maybe they're digging a toilet pit," Bill said.

A few drops of rain began to fall.

Odd, Bill thought. There hadn't been a cloud in the sky earlier.

He began to look for the tent's rain fly cover when he suddenly heard a bloodcurdling scream. He turned around to see Sally looking up into the sky, pointing her flashlight. There were wet, red streaks across her face.

Bill aimed his flashlight up to where she was looking. He could see something suspended in the treetops. It was—

AAAAH!

Killed by Kooties

Morley Mortimer was the creepiest kid in school. His face was covered with hideous pimples that were constantly bubbling up and erupting like the mudpots of Yellowstone. His nose was always running like someone training for a marathon. And he was always drooling like a leaky toilet.

In short, Morley was a poster child for the kooties.

One day after school, the coolest kid in school, Roger Reeves, was practicing free throws in the gym.

"Those free throws aren't gonna make themselves," the coach had said. "You need to spend as much time practicing as you do standing in front of the mirror."

Yeah, yeah, yeah, Roger thought. And how does he know how much time I spend in front of the mirror?

After shooting his tenth brick in a row, he went over to take a drink from his water bottle.

Then he went back to the line and missed another shot. Badly.

That's when Morley walked in.

"Hey, Roger," he said, as spit flew out of his mouth. "You trying to make a basket or are you building a house?"

"Good one, More," Roger said. "What brings you here?"

"Oh, I forgot my water bottle," Morley said.

Roger watched Morley walk over and pick up his water bottle.

"Hey, that's mi—" Roger began to say and stopped. He remembered at that moment that he had forgotten his own water bottle back at his desk. And then the sick realization hit him like a ton of free throws that he had just taken a drink from that water bottle over there. Morley's water bottle!

"You okay, Roger?" Morley said as he wrapped his lips around the bottle's valve. "You look a little sick."

"Sick? Sick!" Roger's mind screamed. "I'm dying here!"

For the rest of the day, Roger did his best to think about something else. But he couldn't get his mind off it. Those lips touching his lips. That drool going in his mouth and down his throat. Those Morley germs coursing through his body. Those germs. Those Morley germs! Ah!

Roger didn't eat dinner that night and went to bed early.

He woke up at some point, needing to go to the bathroom. After he had finished he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror.

No. It couldn't be. His face was covered with pimples. Snot was running down his nose in thick gobs. He was drooling. Just like Morley. Just like Morley.

The next morning his mom found Roger in bed, a look of complete horror on his face. He was dead.

The autopsy revealed that he had died of a heart attack.

"His heart was in perfect shape," the coroner said. "It's as if he died of a great and terrible fright."

The man at the funeral home was grateful for having so little work to do.

"Such a handsome young man," he told Roger's family. "Such a perfect face. I couldn't find a single mark on him. Not even as much as a pimple."

Wendigo Psychosis

It was a beautiful day. The snow that had been falling steadily for two weeks had finally stopped, making way for an icy blue sky. The mountains that surrounded the small Wyoming town looked bodacious.

Josh wished he could get up there. As he started driving toward his high school, he was thinking about cross-country skiing and decided to just turn around. With his skis already in the car, it was just a matter of navigating up the slick, winding roads.

He arrived at the trailhead and parked. It wasn't surprising to find that he was the only one there. He checked the backpack that was always stored in the Jeep and found

plenty of water and snacks. His plan was to go out for just an hour or two, then maybe head back to catch his afternoon classes.

The trail wound through a dense forest of pine trees. Everything was plastered with thick white snow. He was happy to see that he was the first and only skier on the trail. He was making new tracks, which meant he wasn't going to be able to go very fast.

After about an hour, Josh stopped to take some pictures. He unzipped his backpack and looked around. That's when he noticed it. A little way down from where he stood were fresh footprints alongside his ski tracks, as if somebody were following him.

"This can't be," he said.

He hadn't seen anybody and there had been no other cars in the lot.

He took a few pictures and started up again.

In a little while he stopped and again found footprints behind him, right beside his tracks.

"What in the Devil is going on?" he whispered.

Nobody was around for miles. In fact, he hadn't seen another person, bird, or animal the entire morning.

He stared at them and to his horror, he actually saw footprints being formed right in front of his eyes, heading closer!

Josh started skiing harder, now sure that somebody or something was stalking him. He could almost feel eyes on his back, but he had no logical explanation for what it was.

When he stopped to catch his breath, he dreaded looking back. But he did. And again there were footprints, coming up the ridge toward him. A chill shot through his body.

Something was really there! Something he couldn't see.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

Only his echo answered back.

Josh ended up going much farther than he originally planned. He looked at his watch.

"I've got to turn around if I want to get back before dark," he said.

He took off. There was nothing to do but ski back toward whatever was headed his way.

***

Jeremiah Smith was having a terrible month. The winter had been difficult, so very difficult. Recent storms had dumped at least two feet of snow, which made trapping and hunting down right impossible.

As he stepped out of his shelter, his stomach growled. He was starving and weak, but was happy to finally see a blue sky. He put on his buckskin coat and coonskin hat. Although it had stopped snowing, it was extremely cold.

His food supply was beyond running low—it was just plain out. He had finished off the leg a week ago. The leg he had cut off a dead Indian he had found.

At first the meat tasted odd but by the end, Jeremiah was sure he had never eaten anything as delicious.

Jeremiah stood by the fire, sipping the last of his coffee-flavored water. Just a hard winter, that's all. He had lived out here three years already. He would get through this. Things would turn around.

He loved the peace and serenity of the mountain man life. He recalled back to when he had first heard about men going off to the west, to live off the land and trap and hunt animals. It sounded like paradise. He had been a soldier in the Mexican American War and had been forced to do many bad things. He wanted to spend the rest of his life forever away from other men and their politics. He was never going back.

He made sure he had all his gear for a day of hunting: his Hawken rifle, Bowie knife, and powder horn. Then he walked into the woods.

When he walked over a ridge, he hesitated. Up ahead was an Indian burial ground. He didn't like to cross over such things. Bad luck. But the way he saw it, he had to search everywhere for food, even there. Besides, he thought he had seen something moving in the trees.

Jeremiah crossed the burial site as fast as he could. He would just put it out of his mind and focus on the hunt. If he had to track the beast all day, he would. He would wait and make the one shot from his Hawken's count.

For a long while he followed his prey. It was leaving strange tracks in the snow. He couldn't make out what it was. It ran like an animal but left tracks like a sled. Could have been another mountain man or Indian. At this point, he didn't care.

The prey would dart ahead, but Jeremiah was always able to catch up. After a while, he felt good about his chances. He could smell the tender meat cooking over an open fire. It made his mouth water just thinking about it. He hoped the meat would taste as sweet as that leg had.

Jeremiah stopped and took careful aim. And then the strangest thing happened. Right on top of a small hill, the beast turned and headed right toward him.

He took aim. Finally, his luck was changing.

The Woman in the Painting

The hotel room was small but had everything Jim Chin needed for the night: a bed, a desk, and a bathroom.

He opened his computer and checked email and the day's news. After a while, he looked up and studied the painting that hung over the desk. It was almost like a mirror, reflecting the room behind Jim. Everything was just as it was in the room. There was the desk and the bed and chair by the window. The only difference was that a woman was sitting in the chair. Jim could only see the back of her head. She had her gray hair up in a

bun and a lavender-colored ribbon around her neck. Everything about the scene was from another time. A simpler, old-fashioned time.

It had been a long day. After flipping through the television channels several times, Jim began to get sleepy. He soon drifted off, the remote still in his hand. The bed was comfortable, and the hotel and street outside quiet. But Jim didn't sleep well. He tossed and turned and tossed and turned some more.

At one point during the night, the smell of perfume or flowers filled the room. Jim wasn't very good at identifying flowers but he thought they might be lilacs.

Jim sat up and looked around the room. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. But then as he looked at the painting, the woman in the chair suddenly turned toward him. There was no long black hooded robe, no scythe. In fact the old woman looked right at him and smiled in a kind, friendly way. Yet at that moment Jim knew as sure as he knew anything in this world, that this was the face of death.

And he knew that she was coming for him.

When the alarm clock went off in the morning, Jim still felt sleepy. But he was relieved that the nightmare had just been a dream. Nothing more.

He got up and packed his bag. The painting was just as he had first seen it. The woman was sitting with her back to Jim. He went downstairs and checked out of the hotel.

On her 12th floor balcony an ancient woman watered her garden. She smiled up at the sun. She had a ribbon around her neck. The old woman suddenly slipped on a wet tile and bumped into a large pot of flowers that was balanced on the railing. The pot of light purple flowers teetered for a moment and then fell over the side. Down, down, down it dropped toward the street below.

At that same moment Jim stepped out onto the sidewalk. A second later there was a skull-shattering crash and then screams from the people on the street.

Le Père Fouettard

"Wait for me, girl," the voice called out. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

Abby ran as fast as she could down the dark cobblestone street, but the footsteps kept getting louder and closer.

"Wait for me, girl," the voice said again. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

Abby's heart pounded away like a mechanical monkey beating his drum.

She looked over her shoulder but still couldn't see the figure's face.

"Wait for me, girl. I won't hurt yooooooou…"

"No!" she screamed. "Nooo!"

And then she woke up.

This same dream had haunted her sleep for the last six nights. The only difference was that each time the shadow figure got closer. She had a feeling of dreadful certainty that when the thing caught up to her, she would die in the dream—and in real life.

"You look terrible," her mom said the next morning. "Another nightmare? Maybe you can take a nap when you get home from school."

That's right, Abby thought. We have show-and-tell in French class today.

Abby finished her orange juice and went back to her room.

She reached up on the highest shelf and brought down the odd Santa Claus doll her dad had recently brought back from France for her.

Abby had stopped believing in old St. Nick a few years ago, but she still loved to collect the dolls.

This doll was dressed all in black with a black beard to boot. Even its eyes were completely black with no whites showing. Its expression was also dark and angry. He carried a stick and an empty sack.

Abby thought the doll was rather strange looking, but that wasn't all that unusual. Each doll was just the artist's interpretation. No two were alike. Most were jolly. But some looked a little scary.

When it was her turn, Abby walked up to the front of the class with the doll.

"*Bonjour*," she said. "*Voici mon poupée de Père Noel*."

The teacher smiled and interrupted.

"That is not Santa Claus," she said in English with a heavy French accent. "That is Père Fouettard."

Abby looked confused.

"Take a seat, *mon cher*," the teacher said. "I can explain it to you after class."

Later the teacher told her all about Père Fouettard. It turned out that he was Santa Claus' assistant. His job was to punish the bad kids with his stick.

"The story has been cleaned up and made politically correct throughout the years," the teacher said. "But it began as a typically grisly fairy tale.

"Some of the earliest accounts state that Père Fouettard was a butcher who chopped up three young boys for their money and used the meat in a stew. When Père Noel, to you Santa Claus, heard about this he brought the boys back to life and made Père Fouettard into his assistant."

"That's a pretty weird story," Abby said. "I mean, *ce très bizarre*."

On her way home it struck her that she had started having the nightmare right about the time her dad had given her the doll. She decided to put it somewhere else in the house.

She didn't want to hurt her father's feelings, so she had to think of an appropriate place for Père Fouettard. But for now he would go in the back of the coat closet by the front door.

That night, Abby looked up at her collection.

"Good night, Santas," she said, turning off the light.

She soon fell into a deep sleep.

And then the dream came back. Abby was being chased again.

"Wait for me, girl," a voice called out behind her. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

The dark figure was close now, closer than he had ever been. The footsteps were right behind her.

Abby felt a pain in her ankle.

A moment later she woke up screaming. Her dad rushed into the room.

“That was a bad one, huh?” he said.

“It was so real,” Abby sighed. “My leg still hurts.”

She pulled the covers off and saw several red welts around her ankle.

“How can that be?” Abby screamed.

Hiding under the foot of the bed, the doll smiled.

“I won’t hurt you, girl,” he whispered in a French accent. “Next time I’ll just kill you.”

AAAAH!

Blood Test

Nathan was always getting into accidents. Broken bones, chipped teeth, and sprained ankles were everyday events. So when he woke up in a hospital room in pain, he wasn't all that surprised.

He looked up at the ceiling, trying to piece together what had happened. It had been a crisp autumn morning. He remembered the crunch of the leaves beneath his rubber bicycle wheels as he hurried to class. The street was just coming up where he would cross and…

It had all happened so suddenly. Then he felt his body land with a thud on the pavement, followed by sharp jolts of pain. And then just blackness.

"He's awake," a loud, unfamiliar voice boomed.

"Oh, Nathan!" his mom said, now leaning over him. "We were so worried about you."

"You had quite the close call there, son," his dad said. "But don't worry, you're gonna be just fine. Isn't that right, doc?"

"Oh, yes," the unfamiliar voice said. "With several weeks of proper rest, he should be able to go back to the playground with the other little school children."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Sconosciuto," his mother said.

Nathan painfully turned his head to look at the doctor for the first time. He had black eyes and a thick beard that engulfed his face and he was smiling. A smile that made Nathan's skin crawl, though he didn't know why. The doctor then disappeared out the door and down the hall.

"How long do I have to be here for?" Nathan asked, groggily. "I want to go home."

"The doctor said it's going to be a few days, maybe a week," his mother said, holding the hand of his non-broken arm. "But don't worry, Nathan. You'll be home before you know it."

The days passed by slowly in the bleak hospital room. Even the slightest movement caused intense discomfort. Nathan wished he could just go home and play God of War on his PlayStation.

But the boredom and the pain were minor compared to the creepiness of Dr. Sconosciuto. There was just something about him that made Nathan feel like running down the hall screaming in his hospital gown, broken arm and all. One night Nathan woke up to find Dr. Sconosciuto hovering over the bed, looking down at him with those dark, dark eyes.

Nurse Allerton had told him that Dr. Sconosciuto was one of the best doctors at the hospital. She had also said she would trust him with her life. But looking up into those freaky eyes that night, Nathan didn't feel quite so confident about putting his own life in the doctor's hands.

Nathan felt weak. He heard the nurse tell his parents that he had low-blood pressure, but that it was normal given his condition. He drifted in and out of sleep and had strange dreams.

At some point a large crash from somewhere out in the hall jarred him awake. He glanced over at the clock. It was almost two in the morning. The rain was hammering on the window outside. Maybe someone had just dropped a tray of food or something, but Nathan had a bad feeling about the sound. He rubbed his eyes and threw his legs over the side of the bed.

The tile floor was cold and clammy against his bare feet. The hall was completely empty and dead quiet. It hurt to walk, but he slowly dragged himself down the silent hall. There was a desk where a night nurse should have been, but nobody was there. He made it to a room farther down the hall where he thought the sound might have come from. The door was wide open.

Nathan felt his skin crawl and knew who was there before he even saw the silhouette. It was Dr. Sconosciuto, with his back to the door, standing over a patient. Nathan couldn't tell what he was doing. He thought he heard a terrible slurping sound. He began to slowly back away from the room.

"What are you doing out of bed, Nathan?" Nurse Allerton said, coming from behind him. Just at that moment, Dr. Sconosciuto came out of the room. Nathan couldn't find his voice to scream. He could only keep backing up—running right into Nurse Allerton.

Nathan grabbed her arm tightly with his good hand.

"Do you see what he did?" he asked, his voice frantic and cracking. Dr. Sconosciuto walked up to the two of them.

“Nurse, what is this young man doing out of bed?” he said as he continued writing on a chart. He rubbed his eyes.

“I was away from my desk. I’ll escort him back to his room.”

“I’m beat. That was my last patient and now I get to go home. It’s been a long night,” the doctor said, handing her the chart. “Have a good night, nurse. And Nathan, get some rest.”

“Good night, Dr. Sconosciuto,” Nurse Allerton said.

Relief flooded Nathan's body. Dr. Sconosciuto was perfectly normal. Just attending to patients, that's all. What had he been thinking? The bike accident must have done something to his brain.

"Sorry to have been a problem," Nathan said.

Nurse Allerton just smiled. And to Nathan's horror, he saw her fangs hanging over her lower lip, stained in red.

Nathan never got better.

Piano Lesson

No one knew exactly how old Mrs. Maugham was, but she had to be close to a hundred. She loved her piano and her garden. Early each morning she worked in the garden and then opened all the curtains and played the piano. She played so beautifully that even people who didn't like classical music would stop in front of the house to listen.

It seemed that things would always be this way, but then one day the man who owned the house sold it. Mrs. Maugham hoped she could continue to keep renting from the new owner.

"Oh, dear," the old woman said when the new owner, a man named Wilson, told her he intended to live there himself. "Oh, dear."

He gave her one month to move out.

"Oh, dear," was all Mrs. Maugham could say. "Oh, dear."

Soon after that, Mrs. Maugham stopped working in her garden. Then she stopped playing her piano. Then she died.

Wilson threw out all her things except for the piano, and moved into the house.

The first night in the house, Wilson woke up during the night and heard the piano. When he got up, the music stopped. He walked downstairs and saw that all the curtains facing the dead garden had been opened.

This went on every night for more than a week until Wilson finally had the piano taken away.

This only made things worse. Now the music played all night. Other than the open curtains, everything else seemed normal. There was no piano. And yet the piano kept playing.

Not having slept for days, Wilson began losing his mind.

Late one night, a neighbor called the police. The officers found Wilson out in the middle of the street.

"Can't you hear it?" he kept screaming. "Can't you hear it?"

“He says he hears a piano playing,” one of the neighbors said. “I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

The officers took Wilson inside.

“There,” Wilson said, his crazed eyes dancing around the living room. “Don’t you hear it?”

The officers both shook their heads.

“Best get some sleep, Mr. Wilson,” one of them said. “And don’t make us come back out here.

The police drove away and inside the house Wilson cried, “Don’t you hear it? Don’t you hear it? Don’t you hear it…”

A few days later the house mysteriously burned down to the ground. The firefighters arrived at the scene too late to save him, but they said that after Wilson’s screams finally died down, a piano could be heard playing.

That Day in Dallas

Dan was driving through Dallas, Texas. He had just finished a week of very successful business meetings and was now on his way to the airport. He smiled as he looked out on the crowded freeway.

“I tell you what,” Dan said in a bad Texas accent. “How ‘bout them Cowboys.”

“In point two miles keep left,” the GPS voice said. “Keep left.”

“Now you tell me,” Dan sighed.

He looked over his shoulder and then in his rearview mirror. There were too many cars and there was no way he was going to make it—not with the way these people drove.

“Stay left,” the GPS kept repeating as Dan failed to follow the last-minute directions. “Stay left. Recalculating. Recalculating.”

Dan got off at the next exit.

“Let’s try that again, shall we, sweetheart?” he said to the device.

He drove through a dark underpass and came out on to a park surrounded by tall buildings and blue skies.

“This looks so familiar,” Dan said out loud. “It’s almost like I’ve been here before.”

At each intersection the computerized female voice told him to turn right. He was soon back in the same place.

“C’mon now, little lady,” Dan said to the GPS. “I don’t want to miss my plane.”

After making yet another right turn, Dan looked out at the grass and was struck by a feeling of terrible dread and heartbreaking sorrow. The emotions were so strong, he suddenly felt like crying.

A few minutes later, he was back at the green downtown park. He pulled over and stopped the car.

"Recalculating," the GPS said. "Recalculating."

"You better recalculate!" Dan said, getting angry.

"Continue nineteen point six three miles," the voice said.

"Ah, for the love of Tony Romo!" Dan said as he brought down his fist on the dashboard.

Suddenly sparks flew from the GPS. Dan felt a strong electrical current pass through him and had to close his eyes as a bright light engulfed the car.

"Save him," the GPS said in a shrill voice. "Save him."

"Forget this," Dan sighed, turning off the navigation system. "I'll just get to the airport the old fashioned way: I'll ask directions."

Dan got out of the car and noticed that everyone was dressed strangely, as if they had just left the set of Mad Men, that TV show set in the early 1960s.

"Save him," the GPS somehow kept repeating behind him. "Save him."

People were lining the sidewalk. The cars were all old. Police officers were blocking off the streets.

Maybe they're having some sort of old timer's parade, Dan thought.

"Excuse me, can you tell me how to—" Dan said to a man walking by. "Wait, what's going on here?"

"President Kennedy is coming through here in a few minutes," the man said. "Better get your place."

"President Ke—don't you mean Pre—" Dan asked. "Hey, what year is this?"

Dan knew it was a foolish question. It was a foolish question because somehow he already knew the answer, even before the man answered.

"Have you hit your head, boy?" the man said, shaking his. "What year is this! Why, it's a little somethin' that 'round these parts we like to call 1963."

"Nineteen sixty-three," Dan repeated slowly as the man walked away. "Of course, that's the grassy knoll right there. This is Dealey Plaza. I've seen it so many times on TV."

The crowd in the distance started cheering.

"This is crazy," Dan mumbled.

He looked up and saw the presidential motorcade come into view. He saw the First Lady dressed in pink. The old grainy films began to replay in his head. Dan knew that in minutes, maybe seconds, that pink suit would be covered in bone, blood, and brains.

"Maybe there's still time," Dan said and started running.

He began waving his arms in the air.

"No! Stop! Go the other way! Turn around! Turn around! Stop! Stop!"

It was no use. The limousine just kept coming down the street toward him. The President was waving to the crowd.

"No!" Dan screamed as he looked up at a shiny reflection coming from an open window in an old brick building. "Noooooo!"

A moment later he heard a shot. And then another.

Dan dropped to his knees.

“Noooooo!”

Horse of Horrors

Isaac stumbled across the gray horse while out hunting on the plains one day. It was a rare sight, a horse all alone, grazing in the tall golden stalks of grass. Isaac searched high and low for the owner, because a horse thief Isaac wasn’t. But after not seeing anyone for miles in all directions, Isaac came to the conclusion that the horse was without an owner.

“This here is quite a find,” Isaac said, petting the horse. “You sure lucky I came this way before the Injuns could get a hold of ya.”

It looked as though the owner had suddenly abandoned the horse—saddle and all. Carved on one of the saddle’s leather straps was the name “Sanders.”

Isaac thought about waiting a little while to see if Mr. Sanders would return, but the sun was starting to sink low, and Isaac didn’t feel like waiting around for a man who had most likely been killed by Indians. He decided to ride the horse back to his encampment.

“Giddy up, boy,” Isaac said.

The horse broke into a pleasant gallop, cutting through the grass.

Isaac already had a horse back at camp, but had left it there so as not to scare away the game. As he rode the horse, Isaac gave some thought to the matter. At first, he thought he might sell him. He would fetch a good price. But the longer Issac sat in the saddle, the more he wanted to keep the well-trained horse.

They made it to the Flathead River before long, where they would have to cross to make it to camp.

The horse responded to Isaac’s commands and started walking down the bank into the rushing water.

Isaac suddenly thought he heard something from the bushes behind him through the roar of the water. He turned around, but saw nothing.

When he looked ahead, Isaac saw a man standing underneath one of the cottonwood trees across the river. He sighed. This must be the horse’s owner. His good fortune had run out. He hoped the owner would understand the situation, and not take him for a horse thief.

As Isaac and the horse got closer, he could see the man better. He was most peculiar indeed. Dressed in an old wrinkled army uniform, the young man looked to be injured in some horrid manner. Dried blood stained the left side of his face, and his skin was a sickly shade of purple. He looked to be suffering from a severe infection.

Maybe the man wasn't the horse's owner at all. Maybe he just needed help, Isaac thought.

"You all right there, sonny?" Isaac yelled out over the rushing water. The man didn't respond.

Then, all of a sudden, the horse started rearing up and whinnying, spooked by the man on the bank.

"Easy there, boy!" Isaac yelled, but the animal couldn't be reasoned with. The horse bucked and sent Isaac flying into the river, where he landed headfirst into a pile of sharp rocks.

The last thing Isaac saw was the solider standing underneath the cottonwood, his expression unchanged, like nothing had happened.

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Myles Sanders got the beast at the army fort for a steal. The old man selling him told Myles that the horse had been through many battles in the civil war, and even a few against the Indians. The horse had been retired from duty and was now being sold by the fort.

"I implore you, Mr. Sanders, be careful with this here horse," the old man said.

"Why? Is he violent?" Myles asked.

"No, but he ain't like other horses," the old man said. "He's got quite a history, and sometimes that history follows him around. You understand what I'm saying?"

Myles didn't know what the old man was talking about. All he knew was that a noble horse like this usually went for twice the price he was paying for it.

"Sure, sure," Myles said. Myles mounted the horse and nodded to the old man before trotting out of the fort and into the vast expanse of the plains.

The old man shook his head. He really shouldn't have sold the horse, given its history. The horse's original owner was a soldier in the Union Army who was killed while riding the stallion into battle. The soldier was struck by a bullet in his left temple and died instantly.

Since then, the horse had had multiple owners. And every last one of them had died in bizarre accidents while in the saddle.

The old man couldn't help feeling guilty watching Sanders ride off onto the plains.

Maybe things will change, the old man thought. Maybe this one will be different.

But something in his gut told him the haunted horse would kill again.

El Cucuy
de la Montaña

"I would not go that way if I were you," Victor said.

"This is the way, Vicky. I told you, I've been here before," Angel said, looking past the snow at the trail on the other side.

Stalling, Victor drank slowly from his water bottle. It was dusty and hot, even for July, on the steep path that led to the summit of Mt. Demonico. But it was not quite hot enough to melt this patch of snow.

Veronica, Victor's sister, had driven them to the trailhead and would pick them up after her shift ended.

"I'll see you two little twerps later," she said. "Don't let *El Cucuy de la Montaña* get you—and don't be late."

"Your sister is fine," Angel said after Veronica drove away, playing with his make-believe TV Zorro mustache. "But I don't care for her calling me no twerp and treating us like we was children with that trash talk about some Boogie Man of the Mountain. *Por favor*."

Victor smiled. He knew a lot of people believed those stories about *El Cucuy de la Montaña*. And he knew Angel wasn't one of those people.

"Man, it drops a long way if we slip," Victor said now, looking at the rocky precipice. It was hundreds of feet down, maybe even a thousand. "The scavengers are gonna have one sweet dead man's party on what's left of us."

"You always show up with that fear of yours. Everywhere we go," Angel said. "C'mon now, girl, this is the way."

Victor tried to stretch out the break by talking.

"You know my uncle said he saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* up here once when he was a kid," Victor said. "He said it looked just like a regular man but then it started to breathe out fog or something."

"Or something is right," Angel said. "Your uncle's been breathing in too much loco weed.

"All right. Time to do this."

Victor's stomach sank, the chocolate and peanuts mixing with the now fear-flavored nougat.

The boys walked up to the edge of the snow again.

Suddenly someone walked up behind them.

"Man, don't sneak up like that," Angel said, losing his balance a little.

The tall man had long hair and a beard and carried a walking stick. It was the kind that always made the boys laugh, selling for 50 bucks in town when you could find plenty of sticks in the woods for free.

"There's a better way up over here," he said.

Then he smiled, turned around, and walked away. Squinting in the fierce sun, Angel and Victor watched him leave.

"These *menso* tourists," Angel said.

"Look," Victor said, seeing his chance. "I'm gonna go check it out. I'll call out if I find it."

Angel looked down at the snow and the drop without saying anything. He shook his head as Victor headed off in the direction of the hiker.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Might as well check it out, if it's faster and all."

Victor exhaled deeply as he heard Angel walking behind him.

The boys followed the man at a distance to where the trail veered upwards. They both realized instantly that here was the real trail.

"Hey, don't you think it's strange that he wasn't carrying a pack or anything like that?" Angel said.

"Yeah, not even water," Victor said. "Man, I'd be thirsty."

"Maybe his people are at the top and they have his stuff."

The stranger was already far ahead of them. Right before he disappeared from view, Victor thought he could see the man's breath.

Must be cold up there, he thought.

The rest of the hike was easy. Soon the two boys threw up their arms on the summit in celebration as if they had conquered Everest.

"Wow, this is awesome!" Victor said.

Angel agreed, meeting his friend's fist with his own.

They stood there for a few moments, taking in the top-of-the-world feeling and all the sights. What they didn't see was the stranger. Somehow he wasn't at the top.

"Weird, man," Victor said. "Where would he go? It's like he just vanished."

"Yeah," Angel said. "Weirder than your mom's tamales."

Victor was about to start laughing. But then he saw the stranger suddenly appear behind Angel. The man's eyes burned red through the frosty fog that escaped from his mouth.

Before Victor could warn his friend, the man picked Angel by the shoulders and threw him off the side of the mountain.

"¡Esta es mi montaña!" the man said. "This is my mountain, fools!"

As it came toward Victor, *El Cucuy*—or whatever it was—seemed to create its own weather. The sun disappeared and the temperature dropped like one of those rocks trailing behind poor Angel.

Victor started running down the path as fast as he could.

It felt more and more like November with every freezing step he took. The rocks under his feet were beginning to feel slippery, but he knew he couldn't afford to slow down. That thing was probably coming after him.

As he rounded a switchback, Victor saw the creature out of the corner of his eye. It was covered in snow and ice. Victor screamed.

"*Dios, por favor*," he said. "Help me."

A moment later he lost his balance and fell, hitting his head on a rock. Everything went black.

When Victor came to, it was dark. The sun had gone down and it was freezing. Angel was lying next to him.

"Angel?" Victor whispered, shaking his friend. "Angel."

Angel was cold and stiff.

He must be dead, Victor thought.

An otherworldly cold closed in all around. Suddenly, it was the dead of winter. Victor began to shake uncontrollably. When he looked down, he saw that he was completely encased in ice. He struggled to move, but all he could do was shiver.

Before his eyeballs froze over, Victor saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* coming toward him.

"I will feed on him first," it growled, staring at Angel with those demon-red eyes. "And then I will come for you, *menso*. And then I will come for you…"

AAAAH!

Pond People

On humid hot days, when the puddles of sweat would pool up on his upper lip and run down in streams on the sides of his face, Peyton and his friends Wendell and Morgan would go to Drawdy Pond and cool off. The pond was about half an hour's walk from their neighborhood, and being that they didn't have cars, it was one of the few places they could go without having to ask their parents for a ride.

"Sho is a hot one," Peyton would say.

"Sho is," Wendell would say.

"Dern right," Morgan would say.

The pond wasn't that big, but what it lacked in width, it made up for in depth. The pond was so deep, in fact, that people said you could easily hide a body down there, and it wouldn't ever see the light of day. People said this had happened, back when a serial killer named Smiling Jack came through the town a few decades earlier. They said he killed people and hid the dismembered body parts at the bottom of the pond, wrapping them in plastic bags weighed down with bricks to keep them from floating to the top.

Sometimes, kids would say that you could feel the fingertips of the murdered victims tickling your feet while you were swimming.

This was probably one of the reasons why nobody else was ever at Drawdy Pond. Or, maybe it was the fact that a power plant was not too far away. A lot of people thought the place was polluted.

But Peyton, Wendell, and Morgan didn't believe any of those stories about the murder victims or the pollution. All they knew was that the pond was a sweet place to spend the long, hot summer.

One afternoon Wendell was swimming at the far end.

"Ah, Smiling Jack's got me!" he yelled as the other two boys laughed. "He's grabbing my feet!"

The sun was going down, and it was just about time to get back home.

"Time for supper," Morgan said, getting out and pulling his shoes on at the pond's bank.

“I’m downright starved,” Peyton said, swimming toward the shore. “And it’s getting dark.”

Wendell wasn’t too far behind.

“Ah! Smiling Jack has my foot!” Wendell yelled again. “I just felt him brush against my leg!”

Peyton laughed again, but was beginning to tire of Wendell’s jokes. Peyton just kept swimming and was soon close to the bank.

“C’mon, Wendell,” Morgan shouted. “Let’s go!”

But there was no answer, just a lot of splashing, and neither of the boys could see Wendell in the water.

“Wendell, where are you?” Peyton yelled.

Again, there was no answer. Peyton changed direction and started swimming back toward where Wendell had been. Maybe he had gotten entangled in some pond weeds.

“He’s pullin’ our leg again,” Morgan said from the bank. “I’m dern sick of his shenanigans. I’m goin’ home.”

Morgan started down the trail, but before he could get even a few feet, he heard Peyton scream. A bloodcurdling, high-pitched wail.

“Oh, my God! It’s Wendell’s leg! It’s Wendell’s leg floating here next to me! Smilin’ Jack got a hold of Wendell!” Peyton screamed, swimming like a madman for shore. “Morgan, help mmm—”

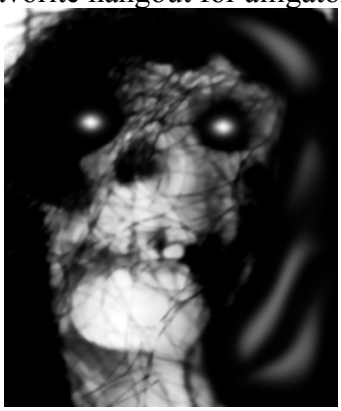
There were stifled gurgling sounds and a splashing of water. Morgan couldn’t see anything in the darkness. He called out to Peyton and Wendell from shore, but nobody answered. Morgan could hear a lot of movement in the water.

Morgan ran all the way home.

***

Peyton, Wendell, and Morgan didn’t know that just a few weeks earlier, the power plant had started preparations to build a new facility and had temporarily redirected a nearby stream into Drawdy Pond.

The particular stream was a favorite hangout for alligators.



Zombies are Us

George sat on the curb next to his friend Mike.

“Man, this town sure has changed,” he said, shaking his head and rubbing his scruffy chin. “You just didn’t use to see things like that.”

They watched a zombie walk by on the other side of the street. His clothes were torn and his face had a lot of black rot on it. He had the usual slow, zombie limp that went with the usual slow, zombie mind.

“Yeah,” Mike said, spitting into the street over his knees. “The town just ain’t no good anymore.”

“Remember all those pretty girls we’d chase on the weekends?” George said, smiling.

“Oh, boy, do I,” Mike said. “And remember those chocolate ice cream sundaes that Donavan’s used to make up?”

“Man. Those were good days,” George said. “This here used to be a good town.”

Suddenly the zombie caught the two friends in his vision and started heading over, in that usual slow-witted zombie kind of way.

“Ah, shoot,” George said, getting up and clapping his hands together to get the sidewalk dust off. “I guess we’re in for a fight. Ready?”

“Oh, I guess so,” Mike said, yawning. He stood up and stretched. “Let’s do it.”

The fight lasted two minutes. The zombie didn’t have a chance and lay dead, again, in the street.

“These zombies are such losers,” Mike said, cracking his knuckles. “I mean, c’mon. This isn’t even fun anymore.”

George shook his head.

“I agree, pardner.”

The two friends walked down the street as the sun fell out of the sky.

“How many of those zombies do you think we’ve killed since they invaded our town?” Mike asked.

“I dunno,” George said. “At least a few thousand I’d say.”

“That’s ‘cause they keep coming back to life. And it doesn’t matter if we shoot ‘em in the head or take them down with our fists. They always come back. We’ve probably killed the same ten zombies over and over and over again.”

They walked some more.

“Yeah, it’d be good if we came up with a solution to kill them once and for all.”

The two men got their minds thinking and then got to work. There was an old medical lab at the edge of town that nobody used anymore. It had all sorts of ancient equipment, books, and potions.

“When was the last time someone was in here?” Mike said.

“I dunno,” George said. “But it’s all ours. Now all we gotta do is try and figure out a cure for those monsters.”

They worked day and night and day and night, reading the books and mixing chemicals. Finally, they were sure they had their antidote.

They went back out into town and killed another zombie and dragged it into the lab. They chained it up to a contraption that looked perfect for such things.

“This oughta do it,” Mike said, holding up the beaker.

A crimson liquid swished around in the glass.

“Yep,” George said. “I think we did it. Now we just gotta wait for Zomboman here to come back to life so he can take a nice, long drink.”

“Yep,” said Mike. “Might as well make ourselves comfortable.”

They went to the corner and sat in old, large cushioned chairs.

“Man, if we aren’t spending our days killing zombies, what will we do?” George said.

They thought for a moment.

“Hmm, didn’t think about that,” Mike said. “Come to think of it, this town was long dead before these zombies got here.”

George sighed.

“Yep. Remember when the movie houses closed up on account of the economy? That kinda sucked.”

“Yep. And remember when we lost our jobs?”

“Yep. And remember when the guy came and took my car because I had no money for the car payment?”

The two men got quiet. Then George came up with a new plan.

“I’m pretty sure that this here potion we created will be good for a little while,” he said.

“Yep,” Mike agreed. “Maybe we should cure the zombies another day.”

“What about our friend there?” George asked, looking back. The zombie was still out of it, but his arms had started twitching.

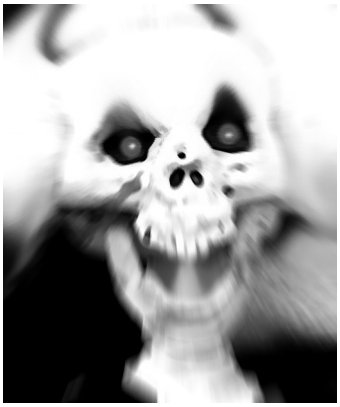
“Best release him. He’s part of our town now.”

They unchained him, but the zombie was still mostly dead.

“Guess we’ll see him out there,” Mike said.

“Guess so,” George said.

The two friends headed back outside.



Acknowledgments

Six-feet under thanks to the usual suspects. You *are* the best.

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